Zombie Apocalypse: A Genre Studies Guide to Survival

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After being confronted with both the possibility of an impending zombie apocalypse and the realization of his lack of knowledge of zombie culture, Levato turns to genre theory in an attempt to unpack the zombie, as a genre, with the hope of understanding the complexities of this cultural object in order to survive the coming of the zombie hordes.

I'm not a fan of zombies. I never watch zombie movies. I don't watch zombie TV shows. I've never read *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. From what I can tell, zombies are rude, always trying to eat your brains or tear out your entrails without so much as buying you a drink first. They smell, being dead and all, and I imagine they're fairly awkward at social gatherings (see above commentary on smell and rudeness). Aside from my opinions on their lack of social skills and poor hygiene, I knew little to nothing about them and was quite content in that ignorance. I mean, really, what more does one need to know? It's not like I have zombie neighbors. My dog doesn't come bounding in from the backyard with Bob's rotting foot dangling from his mouth—Bob being my zombie neighbor;



Figure 1. Aaargh! the zombie.[1]

that is, if I had a zombie neighbor, he would probably be named Bob because that would be my luck: living next to Bob the zombie, not Gurlck! the zombie or Aaargh! the zombie or any other name you might imagine gurgling out of a jawless zombie neck. My neighbor would be Bob, and he would have a jaw, and he would chatter incessantly about things like petroleum free lip balm (because unfortunately, unlike other zombies, he would have lips, and petroleum-based products make chapping worse, and did you know that some manufacturers put ground glass in their lip balms so your lips never heal, and, and . . .). So, the extent of what I would need to know about him or other zombies like him would be how to shut him, or them, the fuck up. Right? Not exactly.



Figure 2. Original CDC Facebook post.[2]

My somewhat blissful state of ignorance was completely blown apart when one of my friends, we'll call him "Not Bob," posted on Facebook that "the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns public to prepare for a zombie apocalypse."[3] Great. Prepare? Now what? I really can't deal with a real-life, or real-dead, Bob right now: "chatter chatter, yap yap . . . my foot . . . your dog . . . my lips are dry, maybe I should put on more lip balm, do you think I should, or maybe I should just switch brands, this one isn't really doing it for me . . . ." Ok, breathe. How hard can it be? The CDC has to have a guide on their website. After all, they issued the warning; all I should need to do is follow their instructions. The post on their blog opens with:

> There are all kinds of emergencies out there that we can prepare for. Take a zombie apocalypse for example. That's right, I said z-o-m-b-i-e a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e. You may laugh now, but when it happens you'll be happy you read this, and hey, maybe you'll even learn a thing or two about how to prepare for a real emergency.[4]

I'm sorry, laughing? More like hyperventilating. But it'll be ok, right? They've laid everything out, a one-stop zombie apocalypse survival shop—just one click from Facebook, right to the CDC website, didn't even have to use Google. So what do we have, hmm . . . caused by everything from infectious diseases to radiation to just being plain evil and/or having a real bad attitude . . . Ok, here we go: ". . . a zombie apocalypse could happen. In such a scenario zombies would take over entire countries, roaming city streets eating anything living that got in their way."[5] Well yeah, isn't that why you scared the hell out of me with: "That's right, I said z-o-m-b-i-e a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e"? It's bad enough–the whole apocalypse thing–but dragging the word out like that, "a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e," who writes like that anyway? It's like finding a long lost journal of some ill-fated mission where the poor bastard made to keep a journal in the first place was forced to write, "I'm the last of the crew, the beast is upon me, I can feel his breath on . . . aaaaaaarrrrrggggghhhh! [sic]," and that is so not helpful. I can almost hear Bob rattling the back door—I'm the last of my . . . Ok, get it together. There's gotta be a list or something. I mean it is a government website, and aren't government employees all "listy," all white-collared, and by-the-book, and everything looks to be in order here, sir, and—ok, ok, here's the CDC's official "emergency kit"[6]:

- **Water** (1 gallon per person per day)
- **Food** (stock up on non-perishable items that you eat regularly)
- **Medications** (this includes prescription and non-prescription meds)
- **Tools and Supplies** (utility knife, duct tape, battery powered radio, etc.)



Figure 3. CDC emergency kit.[7]

- **Sanitation and Hygiene** (household bleach, soap, towels, etc.)
- **Clothing and Bedding** (a change of clothes for each family member and blankets)
- **Important documents** (copies of your driver's license, passport, and birth certificate to name a few)
- **First Aid supplies** (although you're a goner if a zombie bites you, you can use these supplies to treat basic cuts and lacerations that you might get during a tornado or hurricane)

Wait, that's it—water, medications, documents?! What the hell am I gonna do when Bob bursts through the back door looking for his foot?

Chuck a water bottle at him, show him my ID so he knows just who he's eating, whip out my bottle of prescription tranquilizers and try to stall him? "Um, hi, can you read the dosage for me, the print's so small, I know, don't you hate that? Yeah, I just need to like—know how much to take—to like—make the fucking nightmare that's you go away." I can just see Bob taking the bottle and shoving it down his rotting zombie throat right before burying his few remaining teeth into my forehead. And I bet it wouldn't even faze him, enough tranqs to drop a horse . . . or would it? Are zombies even affected by meds? Where's that information on the website? It's all, "stock up on water, pick a place to regroup, plan your evacuation route, blah, blah, blah." Not one mention of what to do if, before you had a chance to plan for said "z-o-m-b-i-e a-p-o-c-a-l-y-p-s-e," Bob was able to get his rather unpleasant mouth wrapped firmly around a good portion of your head, not one! I need some real information, like now. I need to know what the hell I'm dealing with here. Looks like I'll have to use Google after all.

Ok, here we go, Google main page, search field, two buttons: "Google Search" and "I'm Feeling Lucky." Really, "I'm Feeling Lucky"? I'm trying to figure out how to survive a fucking zombie apocalypse, so no, I'm not feeling particularly lucky. Fine, "Google Search" button it is.

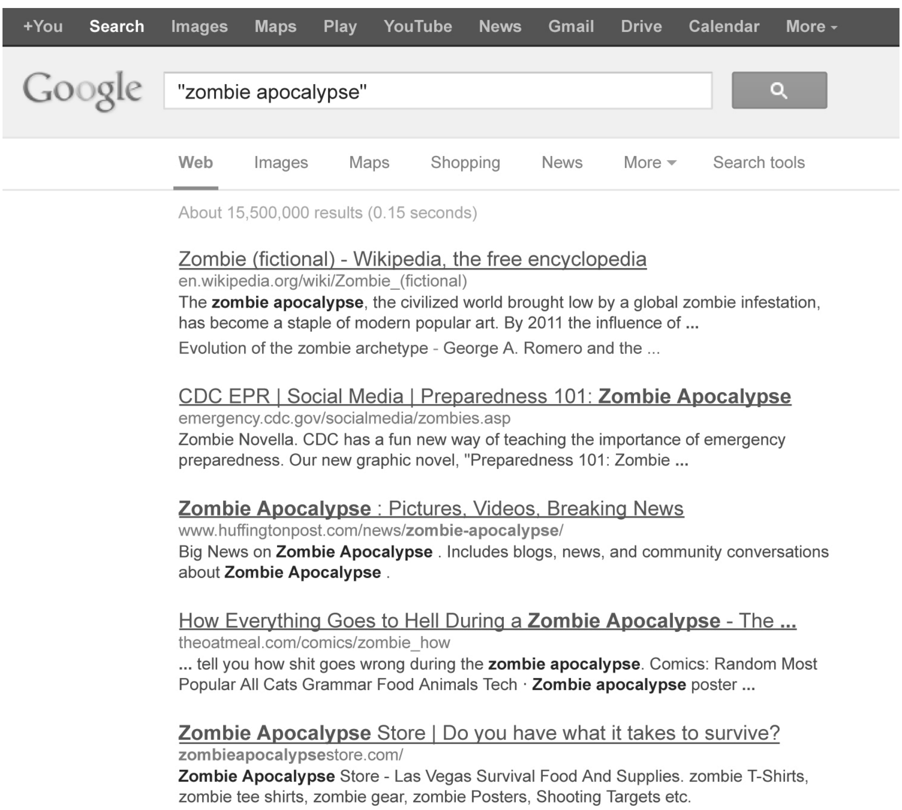


Figure 4. Screenshot of Google search for "zombie apocalypse."[8]

15,500,000 results, crap. "Zombie (fictional) - Wikipedia,"[9] fictional—um, not really, haven't you heard? "How Everything Goes to Hell During a Zombie Apocalypse,"[10] no shit. "Zombie Apocalypse Store | Do you have what it takes to survive?"[11] No! And I can't get to Las Vegas for your four-hour introductory "Urban Zombie Knife Defense" seminar either. I am so screwed. I need to think. Ok, what's the worst-case scenario? No, that's no good. I know that answer already—Bob bites me, I turn all zombie, we spend the rest of eternity together trading lip balm secrets (God that sounds horrible). I need to know how to deal with this shit, like for real. And, judging by the apocalyptic volume of web pages devoted to everything from surviving zombies to merchandizing them, I don't have the time to grow a beard, find a corduroy jacket with elbow patches, and ponder the de Certeau'ean implications of strategies versus tactics in the kicking of zombie ass. I need to get my non-zombie ass in gear. I need a battle plan, and fast. I'll also need a strategic command center from which to plot the eradication of the zombie hordes: a globally networked bunker with the highest-tech research tools available and a stockpile of provisions. Ok, I have a partially finished basement—bunker, check. Wireless internet—global network, check. I have Netflix, a Kindle eBook reader, an iPhone, and Google ready to roll—high-tech research tools, check. And I have enough bottled water and Pop-Tarts to last me until the first wave of zombie infection passes, or until I run out of Pop-Tarts, which should actually be about a day because I only have one box left (chocolate, in case you're wondering)—provisions stockpile, check. All right, time to outline my battle plan, find answers to some essential questions:

- What is a zombie anyway?
- How do I survive the coming apocalypse?
- And, "Oh crap, it's here, that didn't work, how the fuck do I kill 'em?"

What is a Zombie Anyway?

Do I really care exactly what a zombie is? I just want to be able to detect and eradicate! A quick online search for zombie detection finds: "The undead surround us. Infection rates are growing exponentially. How can you be sure who's a zombie before they try to bite?"[12] The answer: the Zombie Survival



Figure 5. Zombie Survival Guide Scanner image of me as a zombie.[15]

Guide Scanner app for iPhone.[13] Sweet. Research complete: just have my iPhone tell me who's a zombie, then stay the hell away from them. Ok, simple interface, live photo and one big scan button. Scan myself to see how it works: "Zombie Survival Guide Scanner Diagnosis: 16% Infected. Initial signs of infection present. Consult a medical professional immediately and present this diagnosis image."[14] How the hell am I already infected? And what's with my face?! I really need to exfoliate. And my lips . . . crap, I could use some lip balm. Did I look like this when I woke up? This can't be right. Fine. (Emotive sigh goes here.) Back to research.

The scanner app came from Max Brooks' website, author of *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*.[16] Maybe I can get the eBook and see if it doesn't suck as much as the app. Ok, here's something, a definition in Brooks' book:

> ZOM-BIE: n. also ZOM-BIES pl. 1. An animated corpse that feeds on living human flesh. 2. A voodoo spell that raises the dead. 3. A Voodoo snake god. 4. One who moves or acts in a daze 'like a zombie.' [a word of West African origin][17]

Brooks further states, "We must begin by separating fact from fiction. The walking dead are neither a work of 'black magic' nor any other supernatural force. Their origin stems from a virus known as Solanum."[18] What the hell is "Solanum"? Ok, back to Google. First result, from Wikipedia, "Solanum, the nightshades, horsenettles and relatives, are a large and diverse genus of annual and perennial plants."[19] That can't be it. Second result, again from Wikipedia, a link to the entry on Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead*. There's got to be more out there than this. Maybe search Netflix. There's a shitload of zombie films on Netflix. All right, here we go, hope my Pop-Tarts last. According to the film *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies are born of "radioactive contamination from a space probe returning from Venus that exploded in the Earth's atmosphere."[20] In *The Evil Dead*, the "Deadites" are undead created by the Necronomicon, an ancient book written by the "Mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred from the horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft.[21] And in *Zombieland*, a mutated strain of mad cow disease, delivered by way of a contaminated burger, is the culprit.[22] Ok, so zombie origins are all over the place, but at least they, zombies, all seem to be some form of "animated corpse that feeds on living human flesh."[23] Ok, on to the next question.

How Do I Survive the Coming Apocalypse?

A Google search of "surviving zombie apocalypse" yields advice from AliceAttack, a registered user of the Zombie Survival and Defense Wiki.[24]

She has a plan that includes "bugging in," which involves staying in the house from the first few days to the first month of the zombie outbreak and requires fencing, razor wire, boards, metal plates, and a stack of red bricks[25]—not quite sure what the bricks are for but they could prove useful should Bob come poking around all, "Hi neighbor," and, "Ooh, are you planning a gazebo," and, "Oh my, razor wire, you cheeky monkey!" But on Netflix I discover that Columbus, from the movie *Zombieland*, instead stayed mobile and adhered to his list of rules for surviving in a zombie-infested world, including: "Cardio" and "Limbering up" (as he was always running his ass off); "Beware of bathrooms" (solid advice, even without the threat of zombie hordes); "Avoid strip clubs"; "Don't be a hero"; and "Get a kick-ass partner" (seems sensible) as well as a "Cast iron skillet" and "Bowling ball" (I'm still working out the implications of these).[26] Brooks suggests that "[h]ooking on scuba gear and blindly diving into zombie-infested water is a wonderful way to mix the two childhood terrors of being eaten and drowning."[27] Hmm, I hadn't thought of that. No time to piss about though, last question needs answering.

Oh Crap, It's Here, That Didn't Work, How the Fuck Do I Kill 'Em?



Figure 6. Zombie horde.[28]

You might think, machine-gun! Go all Scarface on 'em: "You wanna fuck with me? Okay. You wanna play rough? Okay. Say hello to my little friend!"[29] Or maybe, a flamethrower! Whoo hoo, damn! While these are

flashy and rather impressive options, you would be wrong. Guns are loud. They can attract any zombie horde within a mile radius. And flamethrowers are, well, bulky—and they run out of fuel. You definitely don't want an empty flamethrower slowing you down after Scarface over there just let every zombie in earshot know where their next meal was. Characters in the *The Walking Dead*, thanks Netflix, recommend silent weapons: everything from a baseball bat to a screwdriver to a Samurai sword.[30] In the interactive eBook for iPhone version of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (yes, I know, I know . . .), "Mr. Bennet guides his daughters in martial arts and weapons training, molding them into a fearsome zombie-fighting army," and the female characters weigh the pros and cons of carrying a musket as it provides safety but is considered "unladylike."[31] And it would appear that Abraham Lincoln favored a scythe, not some little hand-held one either, we're talking the big honkin' Grim Reaper kind, at least according to the film *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies*.[32] Despite the range of preferred weapons, one thing seems certain: whether you shoot them with a handgun, machine-gun, compound-bow, or crossbow; bludgeon them with a baseball bat, crowbar, or sledgehammer; run over them with a bulldozer, pick-up truck, or electric scooter; poke them through the eye socket with a screwdriver, arrow, pocket knife, or knitting needle; decapitate or otherwise dismember them with a Samurai sword, chainsaw, machete, wood-chopping axe, or big honkin' Abe Lincoln scythe, zombie heads must be destroyed. Otherwise they'll keep hobbling, crawling, or slithering after you, dragging whatever sloppy, gooey, dripping mess remains of them, for fucking ever, and . . . Oh crap. Something rattling. The back door . . .

Oh, uh, hi, Bob. Good, good, how are you? No, no I haven't seen it. Did you check the back yard? Maybe dig around a little? Me? Ha, no, no, haven't been digging myself, no. This, on my shirt? No, not dirt, um, just um, Pop-Tart crumbs. Whatcha been up to? Oh, that's nice, a gazebo huh? Me? Um, just hanging out online, doing some research, you know . . . You'd be amazed at what people are doing these days with razor wire and red bricks.

Please note: No zombies were harmed in the writing of this article. All characters appearing in this article are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or undead, is purely coincidental. The author does not advocate violence or discrimination against any members of the undead based on expiration date; odor or discoloration; remaining number, functionality, or awkward angle of limbs; or possession, or lack, of jaw (though the latter does make them, thankfully, much less chatty).

Endnotes

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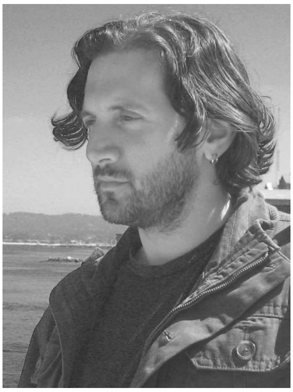
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